

The Parable of the Irrational Father

Luke 15:11-32

March 18, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

I agree with preacher and scholar Tomas Long on this one. This story out of Luke 15 has lost some of its punch. Dr. Long even goes so far as to suggest that it has become a bore.ⁱ Perhaps we once read this as a beautiful story of grace, but now it seems pedestrian and predictable. It's kind of like the sun rising everyday – a miraculous event that we take for granted. Honestly, as soon as you hear the words, “Now there was a man who had two sons,” you know exactly where this one is headed. A young kid goes off, gets himself in trouble, comes to his senses, comes home, and everybody lives happily ever after. Just like we knew they would.

That predictability is due at least in part to our familiarity with this story. I dare say this is one of the most oft-repeated stories in the entire Bible. How many sermons have you heard preached on it? I know that as a preacher myself, I'd much rather spend my time with you on Sunday morning retelling this story than have to wrestling with some obscure passage out of Leviticus or some theologically complex section of Paul's letters. This story is a sermon that preaches itself, so it gets lots of airtime.

But, again as Tom Long says, our boredom with this passage has to do with much more than just how often we read it. It also has to do with the way we read it. Because of our desire to control God, we have a tendency to take challenging stories of the kingdom – stories like this one – and reduce them down to charming tales of cultural wisdom that everybody can accept and appreciate. Like I said, we read this as a story about a comeback kid who dug himself a hole and then managed to climb out of it. But what's the big deal about that? We hear stories of that sort of thing all the time. In fact, our culture makes heroes out of such people. Think of how many people have made a comeback of one sort or another.

- Michael Jackson came back to the world of pop music and was even granted a music award after being acquitted of charges of child molestation
- Michael Jordan came back to the game of basketball after a failed attempt to make it as a big league baseball player. And then, after retiring a second time, he came back again.

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- Marion Barry, former mayor of Washington D.C., got reelected as Mayor after spending six months in jail on drug charges
- Actor Hugh Grant came back to the silver screen after being arrested for indecent behavior in a public place with a prostitute.
- Even Jim Bakker has come back to religious broadcasting after serving 5 years of a 45 year prison sentence on fraud charges in connection with his famous televised PTL Club and his religious theme park, Heritage USA.

Our cultural repertoire is filled with stories of people who, after a mistake or a turn of bad luck, pull themselves up by their bootstraps and get back in the game. Such stories fit neatly into our understanding of the ideal person. I'm thinking here of the proud and autonomous individual who uses his wit and wisdom to overcome the odds and make something of himself.

And so, we are no longer surprised or impressed to hear that the younger son came home. As far as we are concerned, *that* happens all the time. If anything, we are surprised by the fact that it doesn't happen more often. We wonder why others don't come to their senses and start all over. Honestly, when you hear of someone who is struggling, say, with addiction, or who is trapped in a series of personal failures, isn't one of your first thoughts something along the lines of "come on, man, pull yourself together." We assume everyone should be able to do it.

But that all has very little to do with what is happening in this story that Jesus tells in Luke 15. This isn't simply a spiritualized version of the classic "pick yourself up and dust yourself off and start all over again" theme. Neither Luke nor Jesus is into self-help. What makes this story worth telling and retelling for 2000 years is not the behavior of the son, however real and relevant that still is to us today. It is the behavior of the father that still ought to make this story stand up and slap us in the face every time we hear it. For you see, there is no logical or reasonable explanation for what the father does here. His actions don't fit into any rational scheme for what a father ought to do in this situation.

There is nothing in the story itself that would predict its outcome. As we watch the son go from bad choice to worse choice, as we watch him stoop to ever increasing levels of depravity, as we witness him come to terms with what he has done, as we travel with him on the

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road home, as we listen to him rehearse those well-thought-out lines that he plans to speak to his father, we should have no reason to expect that the father would ever have anything to do with the son again. At the most we might expect the father to receive him with an anger-filled lecture and then banish him to the servants' quarters. Remember that we are dealing with a son here who has done more than tarnish the family's good name. This kid has blown one third of the father's wealth. As the younger of two sons, that would have been his share of the estate. In a sense, the father had had to cash in a major chunk of his retirement in order to finance this kid's little foray into the far country. Maybe with a little luck and a lot of hard work, the son might be able earn just a little bit of that back before the father dies in poverty.

But that's not what happens. Jesus says that while the boy was still a long way off down the road, the father saw him. And when he did, he hiked up his robe and went running down the path to meet the boy with tears of joy and kisses of welcome. In his exuberance the father pays no attention to what he has lost, choosing instead to celebrate what he has found. For his son, his precious son – flesh of his own flesh – was once as good as dead but now is alive again.

If we are no longer affected by this story, then maybe it is because we are no longer shocked by the father's reactions. I've heard others who are parents say that as a parent they can understand why the father would react this way. Maybe so. But please don't make the mistake of thinking that the father is somehow obligated to react this way or that the son is somehow entitled to be treated this way. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in this story that require or even predict the outcome.

A couple of months ago a gentleman came by the office here at the church one day looking for some assistance. He had lost his job, his rent was past due, and he was going to be evicted if he didn't come up with some money by the end of the day. You may not be surprised to hear that such requests are not uncommon in a church office. But I must confess that on this particular day I was not in the best frame of mind to deal with this fellow. I'd already had a series of interruptions that week and was running behind on the things I needed to get finished, not the least of which was that week's sermon. I really didn't have the time to deal with this.

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But begrudgingly, I spent time talking with this fellow, assessing his need, discussing options, and trying to figure out if there was any way to help him. I even went so far as to talk with his landlord. In the end, we made some arrangements in the office to get him a very small amount of assistance just so he could have another day or two to figure out a more long-term solution. As he left the office I was frustrated over the time I'd lost but yet was satisfied in knowing that at least a person in need would have a roof over his head that night.

A few minutes later our afterschool director came into my office to tell me that this same gentlemen had verbally accosted one her staff members. It turns out this man was leaving the building at exactly the same time that our afterschool children were being served their afternoon snack. He stopped and said that he wanted a snack too. When the staff person informed him that the snacks were for the children, this man went off on a tirade declaring how unfair we were being and how he was just as entitled to cookies and punch as anyone else.

Now you must understand that this man's behavior was the exception and not the rule. Most of the people we are privileged to help are appreciative and unobtrusive. But there is something both comical and tragic about a grown man throwing a temper tantrum over a child's junk food, as though he somehow deserves something upon which he has no rightful claims whatsoever. He wasn't entitled to cookies and punch. The afternoon snack is paid for out of the money parents pay to have their children in the afterschool program to begin with. And yet he was so angry over not getting what he thought he deserved that he couldn't be joyful over the gift he had just been given moments priors.

That may offend us, but the truth is we all live with an attitude of entitlement. In fact, western democracy not only allows such an attitude; it depends on it. "We hold these truths to be self-evident...that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."ⁱⁱ That's how the Declaration of Independence puts it. What is a right? It is something to which by nature you are entitled. You don't have to ask for it, argue for it, or explain it. You just have to claim it. It is yours for the taking, and no one or nothing should be allowed to prevent you from having it.

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Now, I think we would all agree that this is a pretty good way to organize a government. The American model of liberty as something to which all people are entitled by virtue of their nature as people is an example to the rest of the world. But we must never make the mistake of thinking that God owes us something. When it comes to our relationship with the state, we have a right to be free. When it comes to our relationship with God, we have to throw the language of rights out the window because we don't deserve anything from him. We have no claims on God. He is not beholden to us. He is not dependent upon us. He does not derive the meaning of his existence from our existence. And there is nothing about us that should make God do anything, as though he has no choice in the matter. He doesn't owe us anything.

Which is precisely why this story is so powerful. The father in this story responded to the son the way he did not because of anything in the son that made him worth such a response. The father responded to the son the way he did because it was the father's gracious choice to respond that way. The good news of the gospel is that we have a God who is determined to treat us not as we deserve to be treated, but rather as he has freely chosen to treat us.

God graciously and exuberantly receives us into fellowship with him because he has graciously and exuberantly chosen to do so. There is nothing in the story of creation, nor in the story of our lives that would predict the coming of Christ, nor his death upon the cross, nor his glorious resurrection from the grave. There is nothing in us that would predict or require the defeat of evil, the banishment of sin and death, nor the making new of all things. But through Jesus Christ we do not get what is predicted or required. What we get is grace and mercy.

We traditionally have called this the parable of the prodigal son. But it is never called this in Scripture itself. That is a title we have applied to it, a title that reflects our fascination with the son. To be sure, the son's actions are worth noticing. Had he never come to his senses; had he never repented and made those steps towards home, he would have likely died there in that pigsty. But I would suggest an alternate title to this story. Maybe we could also call this the story of the irrational father – a father that behaves in a way that makes little sense according to our scheme of things.

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Think of the cross, then, as the irrationality of God, as God acting towards us in a way that makes little sense. We cannot explain or predict this God. We can only fall down before him in joyful worship.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ See Thomas G. Long, "Surprise Party," in *Christian Century*, March 14, 2001, p. 10.

ⁱⁱ To read the full text of the Declaration of Independence, visit www.ushistory.org/declaration.